The difference between Lutherans and the Reformed concerning liturgical approach and spiritual mindset is frequently attributed to the way the two traditions differ in regard to finitum (non) capax infiniti.¹ The validity of such an attribution is the subject of this essay. We will not be here concerned with the history of the terminology, since the phrase finitum (non) capax infiniti is an invention of later Protestantism to indicate the view of both confessions—with capax indicating the Lutheran view and non capax indicating the Reformed view. We will instead deal with the ideas behind the phrase. Is it really the divergent convictions—that the finite is incapable of bearing the infinite (Reformed) contra the finite is able to contain the infinite (Lutheran)—that divides the two confessions?

Recognizing that there are other aspects to the debate, the treatment of this theme will nonetheless here be confined to the theological dimensions of finitum (non) capax infiniti debate. The relationship of finite and infinite has a fascinating and rather complex philosophical history, with positions oscillating between complete disconnection and deep integration of the two poles.² It is, however, beyond the scope of this investigation to explore this history. The intriguing question concerning the logical claim related to the non capax position must also be bypassed.³ Instead, the analysis at hand will focus especially upon the doctrines of creation and of the incarnation and their impact on the relationship between the finite and the infinite.

The notion that the finite cannot contain the infinite is often strongly defended from the standpoint of the doctrine of creation since “infinite” implies the absolute disproportionality between Creator and creature. A gap as unbridgeable as the one between heaven and earth separates the two. All creation is finite and infinity belongs only to God, the infinite Creator of finite reality.⁴ With the concept of creatio ex nihilo, Christian theology not only opposed
pagan notions of infinity but also wished to underscore the finiteness of the world. As such, infinity became one of the most important divine predicates. This tendency was reinforced by the way in which the Cappadocian theologians—during the fourth–century Arian controversy—assigned infinity (τὸ άπειρον) to the essence of God.5

On the other hand, the interpretation from the doctrine of creation can be turned so that it is the coherence between the infinite and the finite that is stressed. The notion of the λόγος σπερματικός argues that the world is permeated by seeds of the divine Word, thereby upholding the relationship between the two spheres. The idea that in creating the world God left traces of his infinite existence in the world, or that he has endowed the human mind with divine thoughts, has been one way to impede the reception of an absolute dualism between finite and infinite in Christian thought. Similarly, the cohesion and the distance between finite and infinite are reflected in the theology of the two reformational traditions before us.

- It is from the perspective of the doctrine of eternal predestination that the Reformed tradition has embraced the non capax as an expression of the idea that the finite human being is absolutely incapable of comprehending what the infinite God has determined. On the other hand, the Reformed tradition also calls the universe a book of nature “… in which all creatures, great and small, are as letters to make us ponder the invisible things of God: his eternal power and his divinity … ,”6 albeit with the understanding that, with the fall, a blindness has been brought upon man that keeps him from reading the book of nature properly.7

From the perspective of the absolute disproportionality between God and man, the Lutheran tradition has also fiercely defended the incapacity of the finite regarding the infinite.8 Following Luther in his view that the lost human nature completely non est capax divinitatis,9 the later Lutheran tradition could simply state: finitum non est capax infiniti.10 Lutherans however also agree with Luther in assuming that nature is full of God’s presence.11 All things can serve as a
mask behind which God is hiding himself. From this perspective, then, the \textit{finitum capax infiniti} is valid as well. Yet by playing hide-and-seek in the world, God intends to hide himself in order to be found where he wants to be found, namely, in the humble flesh of Jesus Christ. In spite of this intimate presence of God even in the smallest things, God does not extradite himself to the finite world, since, as Luther said, “nothing is so small but God is still smaller, nothing so large but God is still larger, nothing is so short but God is still shorter, nothing so long but God is still longer, nothing is so broad but God is still broader, nothing so narrow but God is still narrower, and so on.”

God is thus \textit{semper maior} also where he is \textit{semper minor}.

Seen from these various perspectives, one could note some balance between God’s transcendence and God’s immanence in both traditions. However from the perspective of the incarnation, such a balance comes under stress. The Lutheran tradition concludes from God’s incarnation in Christ that by this very fact finite reality became apparently capable of bearing the infinite. That the Word has become flesh is the basis of the Lutherans’ \textit{capax} claim. Lutherans have tended to imbue incarnation with a structural meaning which puts the relationship between finite and infinite into a completely new light—with far-reaching consequences. The incarnation brings about a new impression of God as well as of humans and the world.

For the Reformed tradition, on the contrary, the incarnation has a much more limited scope. That God became human is seen as a unique event that does not affect the essence of human and divine nature. In this way, the incarnation is, so to speak, an “emergency measure” necessary for human salvation to be accomplished, but leaving the separation between finite and infinite intact. To state these divergent views concerning the scope of the incarnation into a unified formula, one could say that the Reformed claim that the Word \textit{has been} flesh which left the \textit{non capax} unimpaired, while Lutherans contend that the Word \textit{has become} flesh, in such a way that the \textit{non capax} has experienced a significant breach. The Reformed reluctance to draw such conclusions from the incarnation is illustrated by their view of the incarnation as a humiliation of Christ. According to the Reformed, the incarnation is in fact beneath the divine
dignity. For Lutherans, on the contrary, the incarnation as such positively reveals a “human God”; the humiliation of Christ is presumed not to start until he takes on our sins.\footnote{15}

The effect of these divergent views of the incarnation is particularly noticeable in regard to two concerns: the attitude toward religious images and the understanding of the real presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper. These two concerns will be explored in the next two sections. In addition, the impact of the conflicting concerns are quite tangible in Christology where the so called Extra Calvinisticum and the Infra Lutheranum collide. This christological disagreement will be dealt with in the fourth section of this essay.

To promote further discussion, we will then offer some preliminary observations and remarks, evaluate recent ecumenical discussions, and consider some of the deeper motivations that lie behind the Lutheran and Reformed positions. Finally, in analyzing what has been at stake for each of the confessions, special attention will be paid to new ground that has been broken by the Lutheran tradition.

Religious Images

Generally speaking, the Reformation objected to religious images as they had been used in Roman Catholic worship. The cult of images was considered a form of idolatry impeding the true adoration of the one and only God. However, in motivation as well as in consequences, the Reformation appeared to be divided. Regarding images, Lutherans and Reformed certainly disagreed with each other; in addition, opinions could also differ slightly within these traditions.\footnote{16} For the Reformed, religious images in worship were not permissible for various reasons.\footnote{17} Besides the moral argument that the money used for religious images could better be spent on the poor, there was the theological argument that religious images offend the honor of God.\footnote{18} God had explicitly forbidden the making and the use of images in religious worship. Moreover, the worship of images would mean that the creature is put above the Creator. The Reformed tradition tended simply to equate the general Protestant condemnation of the invocation of saints with the veneration of
their images. Therefore, even when viewed as “layman’s books,” images were nevertheless disallowed in religious worship.19

By counting the Ten Commandments according to the Hebrew Bible, the Reformed separated the ban on making and worshiping idols (Ex. 20:4–5) from the commandment “You shall have no other gods” (Ex. 20:3). However, most Reformed theologians were not crass iconoclasts urging the complete elimination of all images; they were in fact more opposed to the system that legitimized image worship than the cultic practice itself. Therefore the Reformed urged their government[s] to do away with images because they would incite people to adhere to a false religion. In case the government showed itself unwilling to do this, sincere Protestants had no other alternative than to change regimes or to leave the country. In Calvinism especially, the opposition to images was supported by the idea of the incompatibility of the divine spiritual world and the created material world.20 In his perception of the incapability of the material world to represent the spiritual world in whatever form, Calvin showed himself a follower of Erasmus, who objected to religious images based on a kind of platonic dualism between the carnal and the spiritual.21 From a Reformed point of view, the world can in no way have revelatory capacity with respect to the divine.

Lutherans, on the contrary, have shown a much more tolerant attitude towards religious images, notwithstanding the fact that Luther in his early years had heavily criticized them. The images were originally identified as stimulating the invocation of the saints—a practice which is still explicitly condemned in The Smalcald Articles as inconsistent with the honor of God.22 But later a more permissive standpoint evolved on the Lutheran side. Luther became reluctant in his critique of religious images because of the rigorous way his radical followers (like Karlstadt) wanted to get rid of them completely. These “heavenly prophets”—as Luther mockingly called them—turned the legitimate evangelical objections against religious images into a categorical obligation to remove all images out of the churches.23 Luther considered such a forced obligation as “justification by works” and he became quite suspicious of the motives of these radical iconoclasts. In reaction to their mandatory rejection of images, Luther
tended to allow the use of religious images provided that it would support sincere worship of God. A similar progression from refusal to tolerance can also be seen in Melanchthon’s thought. The fear of revolution which often accompanied Protestant iconoclasm also played a part in the more tolerant stance of Lutheranism.

In addition, the biblical commands were not and are not understood by Lutherans as impeding an image–friendly attitude. The traditional Latin counting of the Decalogue—which Lutherans retained—implies that the ban on idols is only a part of the commandment: “you shall have no other gods before me” (Ex. 20:3). Furthermore, Lutherans like to point out that images are not explicitly prohibited in the New Testament. Luther’s own tolerant attitude towards religious images corresponds not only with his opinion that it is the human ear—and not the human eye—that is the true source of idolatry. His attitude also corresponds to his conviction that despite God’s ability to work directly on the human soul, God usually does so by way of an “outward thing.”

Thus, the finitum capax infiniti provides an important background for the Lutheran tolerance regarding images. If it is not below the dignity of the divine to reveal itself in human flesh, why should Christian believers not be allowed to make use of images to worship God? Images therefore are allowed, provided that—and here the Lutherans are following the Eastern Orthodox line of thought—the distinction between veneration (δουλεία; veneratio) and worship (λατρεία; adoratio) will be respected, with the latter condemned as idolatry, and that the images are understood simply to refer to God’s saving acts. On the other hand, the validity of such a distinction between idolatry and veneration of images has been denied in the Reformed tradition.

In short, when accounting for the two diverging assessments of religious images, finitum (non) capax infiniti plays an important role. Two competing convictions inform the Reformed iconoclast tradition and the Lutheran tradition of allowing images, respectively: either (1) the divine is in no way accessible via the material world and lies completely beyond our sensual experience, or (2) God wants to disclose to us his gracious and salvific presence in the outward material world and allows us to experience this presence through our senses.
The difference between *capax* and *non capax* is also quite noticeable in the area of the sacraments. The Lutheran tradition considers a sacrament “objectively,” that is, from the point of view of the gift, that is, as a vehicle by which God is granting us divine grace.26 The Reformed tradition looks more “subjectively” at the sacrament, that is, from the point of view of the reception, that is, as a response to God’s grace by which the faithful pledge themselves to Christ and to his church.27 The competing approaches have consequences in regard to the question of sacramental reality. Is the sacrament a confirmation of what in principle can also be achieved by the preaching of the Word and thus serves to reinforce existing faith (the Reformed view)? Or is the sacrament a “means of grace” about a new reality, reaching further than the proclamation of the Word (the Lutheran view)?

The outcomes of these different sacramental perspectives are clearly visible in the doctrine of the Lord’s Supper, in particular regarding the real presence of the body of Christ. In the Reformation there exists a broad spectrum of opinions about this *praesentia realis*; the poles are represented by the Reformed (especially Zwinglian) and the Lutheran (chiefly Orthodox–Lutheran) positions. The basics of these various views on real presence can be explained with an answer to the question: “What’s on the table during Holy Communion?” The radical Lutheran response is that Christ is really and integrally—that is, spiritually and corporeally—present when bread and wine are consumed during the Lord’s Supper. The sacrament is after all, “…the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ for us Christians to eat and to drink under the bread and wine, instituted by Christ himself.”28 Or as Article X of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession has put it: “Concerning the Lord’s Supper [our theologians] teach that the body and blood of Christ are truly present and are distributed to those who eat the Lord’s Supper.”29 Lutherans take the meaning of Christ’s words: “this is my body and blood” seriously and thus literally.

The ultimate outcome of this view is the doctrine of the *manducatio impiorum* (“eating by the impious”): the conviction that
even unbelievers partake in the body and blood of Christ, albeit to “judgement against themselves” (1 Cor 11:29). In Lutheran perspective, the body and blood of Christ are really consumed with the mouth (manducatio oralis). Of course, this consumption must not be conceived in a “capernaitic” way—as some opponents have reproached it—as if the body of Christ would be crushed in the mouth and digested in the belly. Luther refuted this attack by claiming that in the Lord’s Supper we are not transforming Christ’s body; rather, it is Christ who is transforming us while we eat and drink. This spiritual effect of the sacramental union of the believer with Christ is however inseparable from Christ’s corporeal presence and of our consumption of it “in, with, and under” bread and wine. For this beneficial presence of Christ, Lutherans call upon the mystery of the body of the risen Christ, which has kept its corporeality, even though its “earthly” limitations have been transcended in its glorified state. In the Lutheran view the signs of bread and wine do not refer to an absent but to an entirely present Christ.

The Reformed position—particularly as it had been represented by the Zurich theologians—implies that actually nothing else than bread and wine is on the communion table and that the sacrament is mainly a meal of the Christian community in remembrance of Christ’s atonement. In this view, the elements of bread and wine are predominantly signs referring to the body of Christ broken for us and the blood of Christ shed for us. This act of sacramental remembrance is celebrated by the militia Christi which, in the Reformed tradition, is not necessarily a reference to a congregation without “any a spot or wrinkle” (Eph 5:27)—this is more an Anabaptist notion—but indeed by a gathering of those who convincingly commemorate the reconciling power of Christ’s cross. Therefore, in this context, the Reformed insist on church discipline in order to remove the disreputable and corrupt spots from the Christian community honoring Christ’s sacrifice.

Although in the Reformed tradition celebrating the Lord’s Supper is not a mere commemorative act—since it makes us participate in Christ and all his benefits—the stress on the recollection of his passion is obviously meant to shift attention from his real presence and to his redemptive work. Although none of the Reformed
confessions explicitly denies the real presence, they confine it in fact to a spiritual one. A corporeal presence in the Lord’s Supper is out of the question because in their view Christ’s physical body is in heaven. According to his human nature, Christ is, after the Ascension, no longer on earth, though “. . . in his divinity, majesty, grace and Spirit, he is never absent from us.”

Yet not all of the Reformed hold that in the Lord’s Supper no participation in the body and blood of Christ takes place. It is a specifically Calvinist idea that believers do partake in the body and blood of Christ in this way: while their mouth is consuming the bread and wine, their hearts will be lifted up by the Holy Spirit into heaven and will be nourished there by Christ’s [real] body and blood. Lutherans, on the contrary, supersede this “locality” of Christ’s ascended body by conceiving the *sessio ad dexteram* [“seated at the right hand”] mainly as Christ’s official sharing in the almighty power of God.

In Reformed thought, consuming the body and blood of Christ should be understood sacramentally, that is as a spiritual way of participating in its salutary effects. Bread and wine therefore symbolize that our souls are nourished by the communion with Christ’s body and blood. From such a spiritual background, it should not come as a surprise that the Reformed resolutely deny the Lutheran idea of *manducatio oralis*, not to mention *manducatio impiorum*. For this spiritual interpretation of the Lord’s Supper, the Reformed like to refer to the biblical statement that “the flesh is useless” (John 6:63) assuming that “flesh” here stands as *pars pro toto* for the entire material world. Lutherans, for their part, do not accept this interpretation since they follow Paul’s and Luther’s opinion that “flesh” needs to be here understood as “sinful flesh.” This flesh can manifest itself both in the carnal and the spiritual world. The various views on the biblical antithesis of flesh versus spirit reflect two different opinions concerning the relationship between finite and infinite: Reformed consider their view regarding “the uselessness of the flesh” as a confirmation of *non capax*, whereas, for Lutherans, their interpretation leaves the *capax* open.

To summarize: in the entire Reformation controversy about the Lord’s Supper, the view on the relationship of the finite and the
infinite is immediately involved. While the Reformed side’s antithesis leads to the denial of the full presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper, the Lutheran side is convinced of Christ’s presence as God and as man, based on the intimate relationship of human and divine. Lutherans see this real presence not only corroborated by the promise of Christ to be present where bread and wine are distributed in his remembrance, but also founded on God’s becoming flesh wherein he has inseparably linked the finite and the infinite together.

**Christological Background**

The question of the reality of the presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper leads us into the heart of Christology. Claiming that a different view on Christology lies behind the controversy on the Lord’s Supper does not mean however that Christology is here a mere theological theory developed as an argumentative weapon in the sacramental conflict. Rather the reverse applies: the discussion concerning the sacrament is rooted in two different Christological understandings.

For Lutherans, God becoming flesh in Christ implies an inseparable and immutable union of human and divine. Because of this union, a *communicatio idiomatum* takes place, that is, an almost complete exchange of attributes between the human and divine natures of Christ. Based on this idea it can be said that the body of Christ, in spite of being bound to place and time, is—by sharing the attributes of his divine nature—capable of being present everywhere and anytime where Christ wishes to be. In particular, this capability regards his presence in the earthly church of which he is the head. The Lord’s Supper penetratively assures and confirms that Christ “... in the nature according to which he has flesh and blood, wants to be with us, to dwell in us, to work in us and to exert his power for us.” Rather than represent an independent, positive Christological line of thought, the Lutheran conception of *communicatio idiomatum* intends to take away the obstacles to accepting the real presence of the body of Christ wherever the Lord’s Supper is administered. The doctrinal theory to express this Lutheran conviction is sometimes pejoratively called “ubiquity.” This term is however best avoided.
because it misleadingly suggests an unspecified omnipresence of Christ in both natures, whereas most Lutherans accept a multivolipraesentia: Christ present wherever and whenever he wishes.41

The Reformed on the other hand acknowledge a restricted communication of attributes of both natures. They go only so far as to allocate to the person of Christ what each of his natures can be assigned. The idea that attributes belonging to his human nature, such as corporeality, would share in attributes belonging to his divine nature, such as omnipresence, is explicitly denied by the Reformed side.42 In Reformed opinion, a corporeality exceeding the limits of time and place goes beyond its very essence as a “circumscribed” entity and would thus be a contradiction in itself. Lutherans considered this opinion a misguided wish to “... determine and calculate what the human nature in Christ could and should be capable of doing or not doing without being destroyed.”43 This christological point of departure is reflected in the Reformed idea that the body of Christ is, after the Ascension, in heaven.44 The Reformed christological view is sometimes called the Extra Calvinisticum, a term containing a pun using the double meaning of the Latin word extra as both “outside” and “particularly.” It refers to the extraordinary position the Reformed take in claiming that the divine nature of Christ is connected with his human nature at the same time that it exists outside of his human nature.45 According to Calvin, this means that though the whole person of Christ (totus Christus) is present where he wants to be, he is not all there (non totum in eo).46

In contrast to this Reformed view, the Lutheran opinion is sometimes characterized as Infra Lutheranum, meaning that the divine nature of Christ is completely united with and inseparable from his human nature so that wherever the former is the latter must be present too. After all, with the incarnation, divinity and humanity are inseparably connected in Christ. This opinion was already taken by Luther against Zwingli at Marburg and has remained the leading perspective of the Lutheran tradition.47 For this reason the Lutheran Confessions condemned the Extra Calvinisticum as erroneous.48
Historical Background and Ecumenical Context

The Christological controversy between Lutherans and Reformed echoes a dispute that had already dominated the early church. This contention—wherein Lutherans take the line of Alexandria, while Reformed share the Antiochean approach—mainly concerns the notion of \textit{finitum non capax infiniti}. The \textit{non capax}–thesis—presumably created by Nestorius—formed the backbone of the Antiochean Christology. The absolute incompatibility between finite and infinite made the doctrine of God’s \textit{becoming man} actually unacceptable, so that God’s taking on human form was the only option left to interpret the incarnation.

The \textit{non capax}–thesis and its related Christology was pointedly rejected by Cyril of Alexandria among others, who considered it a denial of the reality of the incarnation. His sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Lutheran heirs remodelled the Alexandrian view in \textit{finitum capax infiniti}, which was in turn contradicted by their Reformed opponents with \textit{finitum non capax infiniti}. Even the collision between the \textit{Extra Calvinisticum} and the \textit{Infra Lutheranum} can be traced back to the conflicting ideas of Antioch and Alexandria. This background makes the Lutheran–Reformed debate more than an inner Protestant controversy, and puts it in the context of a broad ecumenical discussion between various traditions within Christian thought.

The entire discussion concerning Christology and the real presence is not only about doctrinal issues, nor is it a purely academic theological dispute. The discussion has direct bearing on liturgical practice. The different views concerning the Lord’s Supper are attached to ritual questions, such as: Should the sacramental bread be broken or not? The Reformed committed themselves to this \textit{fractio panis} because they wished to focus on the Lord’s suffering and death. In this way they likewise hoped to bring to an end the Lutheran “idol” of Christ’s real presence in bread, which the Reformed derided as “a baked God.” Lutherans however were against breaking the bread since, according to them, the unbroken host stands for full presence of the body of Christ. The Protestant conflict about breaking the bread could only be settled after being separated from the question about Christ’s presence in the elements.
A related liturgical question was the elevation of the consecrated elements by the pastor in front of the congregation. Some Lutherans wanted to (re)introduce this practice in order to underscore the reality of Christ’s presence, while the Reformed omitted it for the opposite reason. The vehemence of these conflicts during the Reformation era is partly explained by the fact that ordinary people were aware of the theological and confessional issues concerning such ceremonial details.

A fair assessment of the Reformation discussions regarding the Lord’s Supper is complicated by the increasing radicalization of those discussions, which in turn left less and less room for positions in the center. As a result, attempts at mediation—like those by Martin Bucer and Philip Melanchthon—were doomed in advance to fail. The course of the discussions was regrettably more and more poisoned by the empassioned conflict of the parties. Both camps called each other names: The Reformed called Lutherans “carnivores” and “half papists,” while the Lutherans, in turn, accused the Reformed of violating the sacrament and stealing the best part of it, namely, Christ’s body. These developments left less adamant Protestants no other option than to join either one of the two sides, go back to the “Mother Church,” or go “Radical.”

Another undesirable effect of the debate was that the discussion was taken up as a form of combat, that is, mainly for the purpose of defending or rebutting arguments. The result was that despite serious attempts to reach consensus concerning the various conceptions of the real presence of Christ, the controversy became entrenched in a frontline between two combative confessional blocs. In this punch–for–punch exchange of arguments, the grounds underneath the various positions had not sufficiently come to light. As long as these deeper motives were not clarified, no effective compromise on the Lord’s Supper could be reached, with the result that, for centuries, the conflict would remain an insurmountable obstacle for (Protestant) ecumenism.

**Twentieth–century Ecumenical Discussions**

More recently, Lutheran–Reformed dialogues have taken great pains to elucidate the theological ideas behind the views concerning
the _realis praesentia_—particularly in ecumenical discussions which have taken place since the end of the Second World War. By respecting what has legitimately moved both dialogue partners to their respective positions, and by taking seriously the dangers that each partner feared in the other’s viewpoint, important ecumenical declarations in North America and in Europe were finally able to announce a consensus. By mutually appreciating that each partner’s motivations were rooted in a common understanding of the gospel, Lutherans and Reformed were able to ensure that the grounds for past doctrinal condemnations have since elapsed; the two partners were able to conclude that any remaining varieties of opinion should no longer be a divisive force separating the churches.53

Nevertheless, Europe’s “Leuenberg Agreement” (1973) and the North American “Formula of Agreement” (1997) differ somewhat in the way in which consensus is described. “Leuenberg” phrases a common understanding of the Lord’s Supper and of Christology and, consequently, states that earlier “anathemas” are inapplicable to the present doctrinal position of the churches which subscribe to the Agreement. The American document, on the other hand, is not so much aimed at independently formulated common statements, but instead seeks to bring the assertions and rejections of both traditions into a dialogical relation. In the American Agreement, the distinctive doctrinal statements of both traditions are seen as legitimate and complementary expressions of the biblical witness which are nevertheless dependent upon the other’s critique in order to avoid shortcomings and one-sidedness.

Whereas in the Leuenberg Agreement the arguments appear to be decided with common statements resolving earlier points of dispute, the Formula of Agreement points out differences, even to the extent of their irreconcilability. The Formula goes on to say that such “irreconcilables” should nevertheless be considered as acceptable, supplementary diversities.

Furthermore, “Leuenberg” calls for a deepening of the common understanding of the gospel and recommends further studying of doctrinal differences—without mentioning the Lord’s Supper and Christology!—while the American document urges a mutual affirmation and admonition implying the acknowledgement of each
other’s best intentions as well as the readiness to correct deficiencies and distortions in their own views.

Although Leuenberg’s method of “proleptic consensus” employs ecumenical dynamics in dealing with remaining differences as well, the model of mutual affirmation and admonition in the Formula of Agreement offers the worthier cue for ecumenism. After all, ecumenical discussions are not (or should not be) for ending the conversation but precisely for beginning it. Therefore, we may expect that the churches of Reformed and Lutheran confessions would devote themselves to developing common rules of speech concerning the issues in question—rules that do justice to the commitments of both traditions. In order to find such a new *modus loquendi*—one that takes into account the “plusses” and “minuses” of both traditions—the deeper motivations behind the *capax* and the *non capax* must be further exposed.

**Deeper Motivations**

*Finitum non capax infiniti* is motivated by the need to emphasize God’s transcendence, that is, his magnificence and majesty which makes him always incomparable with and elevated above anything conceivable in or from the finite realm. Here is where we come up against the foundational rationale of the Reformed. On the other hand, accepting the possibility that the finite can bear the infinite is grounded upon the notion of God’s condescension—the concept that God descended once and for all into our finite reality and that here is where God has become our companion even into the depth of our despair. This is what it comes down to for Lutherans.

Reformed are concerned that the capacity of the finite to bear the infinite means that God is somehow bound to an alliance with our reality. Would not such an alliance make God available to us, adaptable to our desires, in violation of his sovereignty? To avert this danger, the Reformed have insisted on the *non capax* and, therewith, resisted the thought of the infinite Christ being “bound” to finite bread and wine. In the same way, the Reformed exclude Christ’s divinity from his relationship with human nature, thereby dismissing any idea that the heavenly world can be represented in earthly images.
Lutherans, for their part, fear that their Reformed partners are not taking the incarnation seriously enough by considering it a transitory incident. For instance, the Formula of Concord sharply dismisses the idea that Christ, after having redeemed us, would then not have anything to do with us on earth according to his human nature. If the incarnation is only temporary, how substantial is it then for God? Furthermore, if God also exists outside of and apart from the incarnate Christ, who is he actually and how can we be sure about his intentions? Or to turn the problem around, who could prevent Christ from being present where and when and how he wants to be? Why shouldn’t we rely on Christ’s promise that we meet all of him in the Eucharistic elements? And also: Why would it be that the infinite can only be expressed in holy words but not in holy images?

In bringing these deeper motivations and concerns into discussion, it needs to be remembered that the Reformed and Lutheran traditions apparently have a different idea of the status of finitum (non) capax infiniti. While the Reformed seem to consider the non capax as an a priori statement based on our conception of the absolute distance between the finite and infinite, the Lutherans understand the capax as a statement obtained a posteriori: a notion deduced from God’s self–revelation in Jesus Christ. On further consideration, however, the relationship of the two approaches turns out to be more complex. There are—as already mentioned—sound theological reasons for the non capax–argument. Conversely, a theology based on the capax–argument is in danger of being conceived as a philosophical a priori and regarded as a new ontology wherein the finite would of itself be capable of bearing the infinite.

On one hand, it would be wise to disentangle these various levels of meaning; on the other hand, capax and non capax have to be kept in a dialectical relationship, which means going beyond the usual “rights” and “wrongs” of both positions. In this respect, it is beneficial to follow Jörg Baur, who advances Lutheran theology’s novel approach to the incarnation. This approach suggests that just as the incarnation of the infinite God in the humble Christ alters human notions of divinity, it follows that the incarnation should also shatter
our preconceptions of what it means to be human. This approach is as promising as when Heiko A. Oberman claimed that a proper understanding of what Calvin meant with finitum non capax infiniti demands that this statement also be completely reversed to infinitum capax finiti (the infinite is capable of the finite).

It is the art of sound theology to hold both the capax and the incapax in a mutually corrective balance, conscious of the incompatible and sometimes fluctuating motives behind each of these views. The basic rule remains that the truth of the capax needs to be protected by the non capax, whereas the naturalness of the non capax has to be transcended by a capax based on the mystery of God and human together in Christ.

The Unique Lutheran Way

An evaluation of Protestant views concerning the relationship between finite and infinite needs to consider that the “evangelical” movement took a distinctive path when following Luther’s radical incarnational point of view. In the most urgent question thereto—namely, the real presence in the Lord’s Supper—Lutherans have taken an exceptional position. The prevailing picture of Protestant perspectives on this subject is that of varying opinions directed against a common (Roman Catholic) opponent whose ideas about the sacrificial character of the Lord’s Supper, its working ex opere operato, transubstantiation, and so forth, were jointly rejected, albeit with different outcomes in the end. Although this interpretation is certainly not incorrect, it must not blind us to other links such as the connection between the Roman–Catholic and Reformed view. It is true that regarding the Lord’s Supper, the Reformed and Roman Catholics are, in one sense, on opposite sides. In another sense, the two sides are equivalent in that they share the same premise. For both deny the compatibility of the infinite and the finite. Roman Catholicism claims from this view that the substantial presence of the body and blood of Christ replaces the substance of bread and wine in the Eucharist (that is, transubstantiation). This “miracle” is performed by virtue of the alleged authority of the church and celebrated by its ordained ministers. The Reformed position jumps
from the same point of departure to a different conclusion, namely, that in the Lord’s Supper there is no substance of the body and blood of Christ at all, but only the substance of bread and wine. Here the twain have met since, to overstate the matter, the two positions —magical transubstantialism and mystery-less sacramentarianism —share the same basic presupposition: finitum non capax infiniti!

Lutherans on the contrary take a different line of thinking when they claim the real presence of the body and blood of Christ—and that this presence is based neither on the authority of the church nor on the assent or credibility of the participant. Instead, for Lutherans, Christ’s real presence rests solely on his promise to be entirely present where and when bread and wine are distributed in his name. Therefore, far from taking a middle position between Roman Catholicism and the rest of the Reformation—and thus being a sort of “halfway” Protestantism—Lutherans have made their own way in defending the real presence, namely, by insisting that Christ is a finite and infinite person at the same time.61

In so doing, Lutherans rightly cast doubt on the supposed obviousness of the non capax position. Far from wanting to emphasize a new worldview in which the relationship between finite and infinite is rearranged, the Lutheran tradition regarding the incarnation wants to point out the limitations of our natural framework of thought and experience. Instead, the Lutheran approach challenges us to a new power of imagination—an imagination that originates in the revolutionary faith in God’s universal presence in finite reality. It is precisely this μυστήριον that is celebrated every time and everywhere the Lord’s Supper is administered.

Edited by Hans Wiersma.

NOTES


4. For example, Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* III, q. 7, a. 11: “…omne creatum est finitum.”


7. The Canons of the Synod of Dort, III/IV, art. 1, CCR, 583.


10. Timotheus Kirchner, Martin Chemnitz, et al., *Apologia Libri Christianae Concordiae* (Heidelberg: Johannes Spies, 1583) 45b.


14. Die Promotionsdisputation von Petrus Hegemon, 1545, WA 39/II:341.14f, where Luther qualifies the incarnation as making the “impossible possible,” namely that finite and infinite are made proportional.


19. The Heidelberg Catechism, no. 98, CCR, 450. See also The Second Helvetic Confession, IV, CCR, 464f.

20. The Geneva Catechism, no. 145, CCR, 336: “Because there is no resemblance between him who is eternal Spirit and incomprehensible, and a corporeal, corruptible, and visible matter.”


24. There is, as Luther states, no “word of God in the entire Scriptures in which something material and outward is not contained and presented.” That These Words of Christ “This is my Body”, etc., Still Stand Firm against the Fanatics, LW 37:135 (WA 23:261.16ff).


28. Luther’s Small Catechism, BC, 362.1f.

29. The German text of the Augsburg Confession is even more exacting. Translated, it reads: “Concerning the Lord’s Supper [our theologians] teach that the true body and blood of Christ are truly present under the form of bread and wine and are distributed to and received by those who eat at the Lord’s Supper,” BC 44.1f.


32. See Luther’s brilliant remark in one of his Table Talks, WA TR 4:666 (no. 5106): “Signum philosophicum est nota absentis rei, signum theologicum est nota praesentis rei.” (“A philosophical sign is the indicator of an absent thing; a theological sign is the indicator of a present thing.”)

33. Zwingli, Sixty-Seven Articles, art. 18, CCR, 210.

34. The Heidelberg Catechism, no. 75, CCR, 443.


36. The Heidelberg Catechism, 47, CCR, 437f.


39. The exception here is the communication according to the genus tapeinoticum, implying that the Godhead would actually be affected by the humiliation, pain and death of the man Jesus Christ. In general, later Lutheran theology did not directly follow Luther’s (undeveloped) inclinations regarding the suffering God. See Dennis Ngien, The Suffering of God according to Martin Luther’s “Theologia Crucis” (New York: Peter Lang, 1995).

40. Formula of Concord, SD VIII, BC 631.79.

41. Formula of Concord, SD VIII, BC 631.78.

42. The technical term for this type of communication of attributes is called genus maiestaticum.

43. Formula of Concord, SD VIII, BC 625.52.

44. Consensus Tigurinus, art. 21, CCR, 811.

45. The Heidelberg Catechism, no. 48, CCR, 438: “...since divinity is incomprehensible and everywhere present, it must follow that the divinity is indeed beyond the bounds of humanity which it has assumed, and is nonetheless ever in that humanity as well, and remains personally united to it.”

46. Calvin, Institutes, IV, 30.
47. See Luther’s piercing outburst against Zwingli: “No comrade, wherever you place God for me, you must also place the humanity for me. They simply will not let themselves be separated and divided from each other,” Confession concerning Christ’s Supper, LW 37:219 (WA 26:333.6ff).


52. The Heidelberg Catechism, no. 75, CCR, 443.


55. The Catechism of Geneva, no. 76, CCR, 329: “For after he had performed all that he was enjoined by the Father, and was required for our salvation there was no need for him to remain longer on earth.”

56. Formula of Concord, Ep.VIII; BC 513.32.


